

Shooting suspect's birth mother's life story factor in sentencing

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FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — The extensive criminal and drug abuse history of Parkland school suspect Nikolas Cruz's biological mother could be a key factor in whether he is sentenced to die for the massacre that killed 17 people, legal experts and officials say.

The mother, 62-year-old Brenda Woodard, played no role in Cruz's upbringing after giving him up for adoption. But her past, which included a crack cocaine purchase arrest while she was pregnant with Cruz, will almost certainly be brought up for a jury considering whether he should live or die.

"It is not necessarily her past, but how

her past contributed to his genetic makeup," said David Weinstein, a former state and federal prosecutor now in private practice. "Her use of drugs and alcohol while she was pregnant with him, and how her genetic makeup was passed on to him.

"It might not carry the day, but it will give the jurors another mitigating factor to consider," he added.

The identity of Woodard, first reported Wednesday by the Miami Herald, was confirmed to The Associated Press by a person close to the case who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The American Bar Association guidelines for defense lawyers in death penalty cases say they should closely examine all the defendant's past family, going back at

least three generations.

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, chairman of a state commission investigating the shooting separate from the prosecution, said Wednesday that all of Cruz's background is relevant.

"If information has come to light about his biological mother and there is some relevance there, of course we will take a look at it," Gualtieri said.

Cruz, 19, is charged with 17 counts of murder and 17 counts of attempted murder in the Feb. 14 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. His lawyers say he will plead guilty if spared the death penalty, but prosecutors have declined that offer.

Broward County Public Defender Howard Finkelstein declined Wednesday

to discuss how Woodard's past might become part of the case. But he repeated that Cruz is ready to end it.

"Lock him up forever ... and never speak his name," Finkelstein wrote in an email. "Maybe it will curtail some of the pain and hurt that certainly will happen if this case continues."

If the case goes to the death penalty phase, all 12 jurors must agree on capital punishment or Cruz will get an automatic life prison sentence.

Cruz and his brother, Zachary, were both adopted by Roger and Lynda Cruz soon after Woodard gave birth to them. Roger Cruz died when Nikolas Cruz was a young child, and Lynda Cruz died last November, just a few months before the Parkland shooting.